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A Primer on the Fine Art of Leaking Information

By RICHARD HALLORAN
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WASHINGTON, Jan. 13 — A newspaper reporter newly assigned to cover the Pentagon was startled one Saturday afternoon in the autumn of 1979 to receive a call from a senior official in the Carter Administration who came right to the point:

"Can I leak something to you?"

The official, who asked not to be identified, revealed that United States SR-71 high-speed reconnaissance planes had flown over Cuba to photograph a Soviet brigade whose presence was causing a political flurry in Congress.

The official wanted Congress, the public, the Cubans and the Russians to know that the Administration was on guard. At the same time, he wished to avoid being held responsible for revealing a secret. An article on Sunday morning, attributed to Administration officials, accomplished both objectives.

The art of leaking, or surreptitiously disclosing information to the press, has been an integral part of Washington's communications apparatus since the early days of the republic.

Contrary to widely-held perceptions, however, "leaking" is not solely nor even largely the province of the dissident. Rather, it is a political instrument wielded almost daily by senior officials within the Administration to influence a decision, to promote policy, to persuade Congress and to signal foreign governments. Leaks are oil in the machinery of Government.

Classic Campaign on Budget

They are also one way the Government communicates with itself. A White House assistant, frustrated because he can't get his views before the President, judiciously plants a story likely to catch the President's eye. A Presidential aide, afraid to confront the President directly with bad news, gets his message across through the press. A Cabinet officer, unable to get past the White House palace guard, leaks a memo that will land on the President's desk in the morning newspaper. In recent weeks, top officials have engaged in that form of communication in a vivid, classic campaign to persuade President Reagan to adopt drastic revisions in the 1984 budget.

For its part, the press rarely turns away leaks that have been checked for accuracy since they serve the purposes of the press as well as the Administration. Leaks, and reactions to them, inform readers, viewers and listeners. They are used to pry out other information and thus contribute to a more rounded story. A published leak often leads to a counter-leak. It also make reporters look good in the eyes of editors, competitors and customers.

Despite a symbiotic relationship between the Government and the press, President after President has complained about unathorized leaks. President Roosevelt was bitter over a leak of Henry Morgenthau's plan to strip Germany of industry after World War II. President Eisenhower lamented: "I have been plagued by inexplicable, undiscovered leaks." President Johnson revoked decisions and appointments disclosed before he announced them. President Nixon approved wiretaps to ferret out leakers.

Mr. Reagan is no exception, exclaiming earlier this week: "I've had it up to my keister with these leaks." The President seemed angry with officials in the White House, the Council of Economic Advisers, the Office of Management and Budget and Treasury Department whose daily leaks sought budget changes.

From the office of Martin S. Feldstein, chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers, had come leaks of economic forecasts that would drive deficits toward an astronomical $300 billion by 1988. Officials working for Treasury Secretary Donald T. Regan let it be known that he favored new taxes in 1985 to slice that deficit. Aides to David A. Stockman, the O.M.B. director, slipped out suggestions for reducing planned domestic spending, including lids on wages for Government employees, and took particular aim at military spending. Officials close to political advisers such as the White House chief of staff, James A. Baker 3d, sugggested concern about Congressional opposition to the budget.

Confronted with headlines geperated by those leaks, Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger circled his wagons around the Pentagon and ordered Defense Department officials not to discuss budget decisions. He thus left the field to his opponents. On Monday, White House officials informed him privately that the President, who had defended military spending plans only last week, wanted a reduction. Mr. Weinberger announced on Tuesday that he had "recommended" an $8 billion cut from $247 billion in military spending projected for 1984.

Disturbed by the disarray, Mr. Reagan ordered a clampdown on information and instituted new guidelines for official contacts with reporters. But that was not the first time this Administration has tried to turn off the spigot. Presidential assistants have repeatedly sought to control contacts between officials and reporters, with limited success. George P. Shultz, shortly after arriving in Washington as Secretary of State, complained that discussions at a staff meeting had been relayed to reporters within minutes.

Mr. Weinberger has been assiduous in trying to stop leaks, even though the Pentagon has investigated 69 incidents since 1975 without catching a single leaker. Undaunted, the Secretary has curtailed information available to public affairs officers for routine press briefings, instructed officials to limit background discussions and planned wider use of polygraphs, or lie detectors, to dissuade potential leakers. "We want to discourage people with hidden agendas," said Henry E. Catto Jr., Mr. Weinberger's chief spokesman.

Yet top officials in the Reagan Administration have been as active as their predecessors in this kind of disclosing. A senior Defense official, eager to stimulate publicity about a Pentagon booklet on Soviet military power, passed an early copy to The New York Times. To protect his identity, the source used an intermediary outside the Government.

Study of Israeli Air Space

In persuading the Senate to approve the sale of Awacs radar warning aircraft to Saudi Arabia, Defense officials authorized disclosures of confidential information to contend that Israel would not be threatened. Officials showed reporters a secret study of Israeli airspace done with computers and maps intended to show that mountains would prevent the Saudis from peering into Israel.

In the dispute over selling machinery to the Soviet Union for a Siberian pipeline, an economic official once tried to prevent Alexander M. Haig Jr., then the Secretary of State, from reaching a compromise with Europeans promoting the sale. The leaker asserted that Mr. Haig had gone be-

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yond his instructions.

The Navy recently countered leaks of adverse reports on the F-18 Hornet fighter-bomber with its own leaks to persuade Congress to continue production. In one case, confidential briefing papers were in the hands of reporters even as the Chief of Naval Operations, Adm. James D. Watkins, heard the briefing.

In many cases, officials don't plan to disclose confidential information, but are induced to do so. An enterprising reporter who has uncovered some information comes around and asks for more. An official, uncertain about how much the reporter really knows, may spill details for a number of reasons: He may be worried that the reporter has been misled; he may be anxious to explain the Administration's point of view, or he may want to show how much he knows.

'Real News' in Memorandum

More leaks come from Capitol Hill, where Congressmen are often miffed because their advice hasn't been taken. A reporter checking with a Congressional aide last summer stumbled across a secret United States memorandum addressed to Peking about American policy toward Taiwan. The Congressional aide brushed aside the reporter's routine news" was the memorandum.

In addition to deliberate leaks, still other unauthorized information is disclosed inadvertently. A reporter asking a Pentagon official about nuclear forces found him guarded since the President's $180 billion expansion program hadn't been announced. On the way out, however, the reporter suggested that the program would be rather comprehensive. The official replied: "Yes, and don't forget submarines," opening up an entirely new line of inquiry pursued elsewhere.

On the other hand, the Administration has sometimes been mistakenly accused of leaking. Archbishop Joseph I. Bernardin asserted last November that the White House had leaked a letter on nuclear arms by the President's national security adviser, William P. Clark, addressed to Roman Catholic bishops, then meeting here. In fact, that was not the case.

A reporter, learning that the letter was being drafted, merely asked for a copy after it had been delivered to the bishops. Archbishop Bernardin complained the next day that he had read it first in The New York Times. It hadn't been leaked; the Archbishop just hadn't picked up his mail.